

Chapter 16 is the first time the apostle Paul uses the word “church” in this letter to the Romans. He addresses this letter “to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints” (1:7), and calls them “brethren” ten times in Romans.¹

The Local Church (16:1,3,4)

- “The New Testament speaks...of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.”² However, this way of describing the Church is in the minority in the New Testament, and we will only truly experience the Church in this way in eternity. On earth, this “universal” Church is never gathered together at one time in one place. We’ll see it, but it’ll be in heaven. **The vast majority of the times the New Testament speaks of the Church, it is the local church, a specific group of believers in one location, organized with biblical officers and practices.**³

¹ 1:13; 7:1,4; 8:12; 10:1; 11:25; 12:1; 15:14,30; 16:17. In addition to addressing them as “brethren,” calls them “beloved” in 12:19.

² *Baptist Faith & Message 2000*, VI.

³ “A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons” (*Baptist Faith & Message 2000*, VI). In fact, the New Testament is predominately a local church book, comprised of letters written either to specific groups of believers (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Hebrews) or groups of local congregations (2 Corinthians, Galatians, Revelation).

16:1 *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of **the church which is at Cenchrea**; 16:2 that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.*⁴

16:3 *Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 16:4 who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; 16:5a also greet **the church that is in their house.***

16:14 *Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and **the brethren with them.** 16:15 Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and **all the saints who are with them.***

Notice from This Text

- Paul is showing them role models to inspire them.
- Paul is building bridges between believers.
- Paul is reminding the believers in Rome that they are not alone in the world.

⁴ While my New American Standard translates Phoebe’s role as “servant,” I believe she was a deaconess (Paul uses the word δίακονος, elsewhere translated “servant,” but also “deacon” in Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8,12). The New International Version and New Living Version render this word as “deacon.” In the deacon qualifications of 1 Timothy 3, I believe 3:8,9 addresses deacons in general, 3:10 focuses on male deacons, 3:11 focuses on female deacons, 3:11 returns to male deacons again, and 3:13 ends with another general statement about deacons. The word γυνή in 3:11 can be translated either “women” or “wives.” I believe it should be translated “women.” There are certain areas of ministry in the congregation that are more appropriate and needful of mature sisters in the faith full of the Spirit and wisdom.

What Is a Local Church?

- Mark Driscoll (b. 1970), considering how many have attempted to redefine church, asked tongue-in-cheek, “if two guys who can spell ‘emergent’ are drinking beer and one of them says, ‘Jesus Christ,’ even in a negative way, does that count as a church?”⁵ Of course, most of us wouldn’t define “church” in such a shallow way, but how would you then define what it means to be the “church”? More importantly, how does the Bible define it?
- The Bible does give us minimum requirements for what it means to be a local church:
 - What it does: after being baptized on the day of Pentecost, new believers filled with the Holy Spirit began “*continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread [the Lord’s Supper] and to prayer*” (Acts 2:42). To be the church, believers must gather and do certain basic things.⁶
 - Its goal:
 - “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [the Lord Jesus] commanded you*” (Matthew 28:19,20).

⁵ June 4, 2009, at a Desiring God Conference

(<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-is-the-church>).

⁶ The word “Church” (ἐκκλησία) is the New Testament’s translation of an Old Testament word that always means “assembly,” or “gathering” (לִקְוָה, in Exodus 35:1; Leviticus 8:1-3; Numbers 1:17-19; Deuteronomy 4:10; 31:12,13). For a more detailed look, read “Be the Church” (<https://desertratofmorgan.blogspot.com/2015/11/be-church.html>).

- “*...the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:12,13).
- Functioning parts:
 - Pastor-teachers, whose purpose is “*the equipping of the saints for the work of service*” (Ephesians 4:12).
 - Deacons, who model what it means to serve as Christ commanded us to serve.
 - Ministers (all believers). The Bible doesn’t know of side-line Christians, consumer-only Christians, pew potatoes. All believers are to be equipped “*for the work of service,*” or “*ministry*” (Ephesians 4:12).⁷ We are to grow as servants now (Galatians 5:13; Colossians 3:24) and forever (Revelation 7:15; 22:3).

Is Church Membership Biblical?

- The main biblical purpose of maintaining a clear and definite membership in the local church is for the purpose of accountability (which may be why church membership is not a very popular idea these days):

⁷ The word “ministry” and “service” are the same in the Greek (διακονία, the same word from which we get our word “deacon,” διάκονος). The pastor-teachers equip us for Christian service/ministry, the deacons model Christian service/ministry, and the membership as a whole is tasked with Christian service/ministry as it is commanded in the Bible. Nobody’s left out of this comprehensive description of the local church’s membership.

- The third step in showing “*your brother...his fault,*” or sin, is to “*tell it to the church*” (Matthew 18:15-17).⁸ If this offending brother (the “*stumbling block*” of 18:6,7) refuses to listen, they are to “*be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector*” (18:17). How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? As those outside the community of God’s people who need to be called to come in (9:10,11; 10:3; 11:19; 21:31,32; 28:19).⁹
- Paul, speaking “*to the church of God which is at Corinth*” (1 Corinthians 1:2), speaks of uncorrected “*immorality*” among the membership. If they are claiming to be believers (“*so-called brother*” in 5:11), but are unrepentant of their sin, Paul makes it clear that the church is “*not to associate with immoral people*” (5:9), “*not even to eat with such a one*” (5:11). Paul can contrast “*outsiders*” from “*those who are within*” (5:12) – language only possible if there is a definite list or understanding of the identity of “*those who are within.*” “*Do you not judge those who are within the church? ...remove the wicked man from among yourselves*” (5:12,13). The only way this chapter makes sense is if there is a definite membership of this local congregation.

⁸ This is obviously not the “universal Church,” that is, all believers in all places everywhere. We don’t bring disciplinary/accountability issues to a world congress of Christians – we bring it to the local congregation of which we are covenant members.

⁹ “*Gentile*” (ὁ ἔθνικός) is the pool from which we fish to “*make disciples [τὰ ἔθνη] of all the nations*” (28:19).

- In worship, Paul has to correct “*the church of God which is at Corinth*” (1 Corinthians 1:2) concerning the “*Lord’s Supper*” (11:20) practice when they “*come together as a church*” (11:18). The gathering of a specific group in a specific place is the visible reality called “*church.*” Further, he teaches them about what should happen when “*the whole church assembles*” (14:23). The “*whole church*” doesn’t mean all believers in all places. He is speaking of a specific congregation that has a specific membership.
- The apostle Peter, addressing “*the elders among you*” (the biblically accurate term for church leaders), commands them to “*shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight...over those allotted to your charge*” (1 Peter 5:1-3). “*Those allotted to your charge*” represent a definite group of believers.¹⁰

The Local Church and Universal Church (16:16,23a)

16:16 *Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.*

¹⁰ One of the first things I devoted myself to when assuming the role of pastor here at I.H.B.C. was trying to create a clear membership list for this exact reason. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews commands, “*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you*” (13:17). If I am going to “*give an account*” to God for how I carry out this calling He has given, I wanted to know specifically which souls I had a responsibility over (see also James 3:1). Elders are not responsible for “all believers everywhere” (the universal church), but those who are covenanted together as a local body of believers with definite numbers and appointed leadership.

16:23a *Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you.*

- After mentioning numerous local churches, Paul now seems to widen to a consideration of the universal, or entire church. Jesus speaks of both. In Matthew 16:18 (the first mention of the “church” in the New Testament), Jesus is speaking of the universal church. A few chapters later, in 18:17, Jesus is definitely speaking of a specific local church.
- While the local church is given to us by its Lord, Jesus Christ, for accountability in our growth as believers, our ultimate goal is heaven, where we will “*come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood*” (Hebrews 12:22-24). We will know “*a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God Who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’*” (Revelation 7:9,10). We will be among those who “*have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He Who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes*” (7:14-17).
- That’s the goal. We’re not going to get there by a million different paths of our own imagination and personal

preference. We’re going to get there by doing what He has called us to do, for the purpose He’s called us to, living in the roles in the congregation He has appointed.

Why the Church?

- The New Testament uses various metaphors to describe the Church, helping us focus on the goal of our practices, work, and roles:
 - The children of God the Father: “*...we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be My people...I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me,’ says the Lord Almighty*” (2 Corinthians 6:16-18; see also Romans 9:26).
 - United to the Son as His Body (1 Corinthians 12:12,27; Ephesians 1:22,23; 4:15,16; Colossians 1:18; 2:9,10), as a husband and wife become one flesh (John 3:29; Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 19:7; 21:2,9, building off of Genesis 2:24).
 - The dwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16,17; 6:19,20; Ephesians 2:21,22; 1 Peter 2:5).
 - Peter puts together several images of the church, showing how the Church transcends ethnicity and nationality: “*...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession*” (1 Peter 2:9).
 - Our practices, purposes, and roles are all meant to give us a sense of identity which is beyond worldly categories and to grow us into the various metaphors used to describe what we now and forever will be.

The New Testament knows one way how believers are perfected in Christ: through covenant with a local body of believers dedicated to biblical practices, biblical purpose, and biblical roles. Are you committed to this?